

Three busy weeks in the Federal Parliament

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THREE BUSY WEEKS IN THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

THE three weeks' spring session of the Federal Parliament opened on 4th March in very cold weather, with heavy snow still covering the countryside. The President of the National Council, Councillor Guinaud, welcomed the M.P.s, and three new members were sworn in.

The first business to be dealt with concerned the building of a new mountain road over the Nufenen, which will connect the Valais with the Ticino. Both Cantons are to spend three million francs and the Confederation will contribute Fr.7,830,000.—. This project was accepted unanimously. Second on the agenda was the fifty-one-million-franc project of developing the Geneva-Cointrin Airport which, when the fourth part of the scheme is completed, will be one of the most modern airports.

Long discussions were roused by the proposed alterations to the Aviation Laws, whose article 8 deals with mountain flights. This has now been amended to allow take-offs and landings on landing strips or areas recognised by the Federal, Cantonal or Military authorities.

A very important Bill which has been introduced is that covering building measures in Civil Defence. A very comprehensive message from the Federal Council was discussed. In the light of atomic warfare new measures will have to be considered, especially regarding protection against radiation. The question of cost caused much debate—how much should the public authorities contribute? The proposal visualises expense to the Confederation of 45 million francs, excluding measures to be taken in their own buildings. So far shelters exist for 1½ million people, and a large increase is needed. It will take some twelve years to protect the whole population adequately. The proposed measures were accepted by a very large majority. Parliament approved a Federal Contribution of 18 million francs towards the National Exhibition in Lausanne in 1964.

The second week of the parliamentary session was devoted almost entirely to the Federal Finance Bill. On 11th May 1958 the Federal proposal regarding the revision of the Federal Finances was accepted by the electorate. It became valid on 1st January 1959 and decreed that article 41 of the Constitution which gave the basis for levying the turnover tax, the defence tax and the beer tax should be deleted by 1964. The Federal Council, the Council of States and the Commission dealing with the proposal had all agreed to an extension of this article by ten years. This was accepted by Parliament. Before the individual items of the article were discussed, Federal Councillor Bonvin gave a very determined opinion that any tax reliefs were not justified while the economic boom lasted.

Nevertheless, a small concession in the defence tax was accepted, and the whole Finance Bill agreed to by 98 to 10.

An emergency decree was accepted unanimously by the National Council and the Council of States, giving the Federal Council competence to order restriction of electricity consumption between 14th March and 31st May. The drought of last year and the heavy winter have brought a crisis to the Swiss hydro-electric production, and stringent measures to cut down the use of electricity had to be considered.

Apart from important matters a number of lesser questions were brought up in the course of the sessions. They covered navigation of the river Aare, the upkeep of the railway line Etzwil-Singen, the national roads, development on the capital market, how to encourage savings, a possible extraordinary contribution by the state to Swiss returning home whose existence had been damaged by war, help of invalids, protection of lakes and rivers, to take off turnover tax from educational material. In this connection the agreement with Italy was mentioned which eliminates all customs duty on purchases and school-materials imported into Italy by the Swiss schools in that country.

The third week began with the announcement of the death of National Councillor E. Giroud, Berne, followed by a moving tribute to the deceased. A long debate ensued in the matter of tax defraudation. With 104 to 26 votes a tax amnesty was agreed to and will now have to be prepared for 1st January 1965. The last amnesty was granted in 1945. The Federal decree to join the Council of Europe was up for discussion. Federal Councillor Wahlen reaffirmed that this step would in no way touch on the neutrality of our country. The decision was upheld by 126 members, with only the three Communists voting against.

So far the Swiss Civil Code does not consider the owning of a flat or single workshop, etc. It is only in the Valais and the Ticino that this is customary. Parliament has now accepted this proposal and in future flats will be for sale as well as houses. The obligation of fire and third party insurance was debated at length and separate voting was necessary. In answer to a question, Federal Councillor Schaffner declared that the Federal Council had agreed to an increase of 7% in the rents of old flats. A proposal to discuss this coming increase was only defeated by the President casting his vote against it.

A very important addition to the Federal Constitution will be the new article on scholarships and education grants. Although there are apparently some 2,250 sources of grants and financial help in Switzerland, a constitutional settlement of the problem is urgent in view of the shortage of trained people. In the last twelve years there has been an increase in university students of 42%. The

article in itself is naturally not enough, and it will take some three years until all the provisions are established. Incidentally, the Swiss abroad are to be considered specifically. The new article was unanimously accepted, but a proposal to keep the sovereign rights of the Cantons explicitly was defeated by 101 : 22 votes.

Before the ending of the spring session the National Council had to hold an evening meeting in order to complete its business. The shortage of houses and flats came up once more and it was stated that it would not be possible to stop rent control by the end of 1964. Some other solution would have to be found. Then followed discussion on inflation, in which no fewer than 27 speakers took part. Federal Councillor Schaffner wound up the debate by accepting the various suggestions. He said there was widespread agreement on the diagnosis, but as to therapy opinions differed. The influx of foreign workers was being watched and it was reassuring that a number of organisations had voluntarily agreed not to ask for any further shortening of the working week for the time being. He felt that prices should not surpass the international level and any increase of prices at home would have to be kept at bay. The sitting was declared closed at midnight.

On the last day the alterations in the Cantonal Constitution of Geneva were approved unanimously, also the tax provisions in the Constitution of Uri, and Parliament agreed to give a new concession to the Neuchatel mountain railways.

At the end of the session the President announced that there were some 127 unfinished motions to be dealt with in the summer session, 78 from the previous sitting and to which a further 49 had been added during the present one. It might therefore be advisable to make the summer session four instead of three weeks. He thanked the M.P.s for the good work done, and a very fruitful session came to a close.

—The Swiss Observer

Charm of the Walensee

A Traveller's Impressions

THE Walensee is a little-known lake near Zurich, to its south-east; it is the most attractive part of nature's road from Zurich to Chur or Choire, the capital of the Canton of the Grisons and an interesting old town. Before the railway age the stage-coach drove from Zurich to Weesen at the western end of the Walensee; then the passengers took the boat across to near Walenstadt at the other end, and another stage-coach took them on to Chur. But the Walensee is given to sudden, dangerous storms and there is a traditional recollection of the day when all the stage-coach passengers were drowned.